

# Earth Summit is doomed to fail, say leading ecologists

- 18:21 10 February 2012 by [Fred Pearce](#), London
- For similar stories, visit the [Climate Change](#) Topic Guide
- <http://www.earthsummit2012.org/>



We can forget about fixing the planet's ecosystems and climate until we have fixed government systems, a panel of leading international environmental scientists declared in London on Friday. The solution, they said, may not lie with governments at all.

"We are disillusioned. The current political system is broken," said [Bob Watson](#), the UK government's chief environmental science advisor, who chaired the meeting.

The panel, all winners of the prestigious [Blue Planet prize](#), often seen as the Nobel prize for environmental science, were meeting to prepare a statement for the [Earth Summit 2012](#), to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June – 20 years after [the original Earth Summit](#) in that city.

The world has wasted the intervening years, the group said. [Ecosystems are disappearing ever faster](#), the world is still warming, and two 1992 treaties, [on climate change](#) and [species loss](#), have failed to achieve their aims. Governments, the group said, were largely to blame.

"Last time in Rio we had an unreasonable faith in governments. Since then we've lost our innocence in believing government was wise and benevolent and far-sighted. That's been blown completely out of the water," said Camilla Toulmin, director of the International Institute for Environment and Development, a non-profit organisation based in London.

## Not remotely sustainable

"Essentially nothing has changed in 20 years. We are not remotely on a course to be

sustainable," Watson said.

"What's most discouraging is a loss of feeling that government would help us," said Harold Mooney, a veteran biologist from Stanford University.

No one held out much hope that the forthcoming summit would usher in a new era. Politicians do not seem interested. The 1992 summit lasted two weeks, attracted most of the world's leaders and garnered huge headlines. But this year's event will last just three days, and so far China's president Hu Jintao is the only head of state scheduled to attend.

"The UN text [for the summit declaration] is weak," said energy researcher José Goldemberg, who was Brazil's environment secretary at the time of the first summit.

## **Key priorities**

The top priorities, according to Watson, are ending the fossil-fuel era to curb climate change, and investing in limiting population by making contraception available to all.

But neither were likely to happen because, said Syukuro Manabe, a climate modeller at the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "[the political system is not motivated to worry about the future](#)".

The laureates said leadership was most likely to come from [local government](#), [NGOs](#) and corporations, rather than national leaders [or the UN](#). "Decision-makers should learn from and scale up grass-roots action and knowledge in areas like energy, food, water and natural resources," the panel declared.

"We do believe that the political system can be reformed, and that there will be technical solutions. But time is not on our side," Watson said.